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SANAA, Yemen -- Jaber Elbaneh is one of the world's most-wanted terrorism suspects. In 2003, the U.S. government indicted him, posted a $5 million reward for his capture and distributed posters bearing photos of him around the globe.

None of it worked. Elbaneh remains at large, as wanted as ever. The al-Qaeda operative, however, isn't very hard to find.

One day last month, he shuffled down a busy street here in the Yemeni capital, past several indifferent policemen. Then he disappeared inside a building, though not before accidentally stepping on a reporter's toes.

Elbaneh, 41, is one of two dozen al-Qaeda members listed under a U.S. program that offers enormous sums of cash for information leading to their capture. For years, the Bush administration has touted the bounties as a powerful tool in its fight against terrorism. But in the hunt for al-Qaeda, it has proved a bust.

Known as Rewards for Justice, the program dates to 1984 and was originally used to track down fugitive terrorism suspects of all persuasions, from the Balkans to the Palestinian territories. After the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the most-wanted list was expanded -- and the rewards boosted exponentially -- as part of a push to eliminate al-Qaeda's leadership.

So far, however, Rewards for Justice has failed to put a dent in al-Qaeda's central command. Offers of $25 million each for al-Qaeda founders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri have attracted hundreds of anonymous calls but no reliable leads, officials familiar with the program say. For a time, the program was generating so little useful information that in Pakistan, where most al-Qaeda chiefs are believed to be hiding, it was largely abandoned.

"It's certainly been ineffective," said Robert L. Grenier, a former CIA station chief in Pakistan

and former director of the agency's counterterrorism center. "It hasn't produced results, and it hasn't particularly produced leads."

The failures of Rewards for Justice can be traced to several factors: weak publicity campaigns in places where al-Qaeda's leadership is based; skepticism that the United States would deliver the money and protect informants; and a mistaken assumption that anyone's loyalty can be bought if the price is high enough.

"The program could use some, well, 'rejuvenation' is the word," said Walter B. Deering, a former State Department official who oversaw Rewards for Justice until 2003. "You can't just put a price on someone's head and expect something to happen."

Unearned Bounties

Rewards for Justice is administered by the State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security, which operates Web sites advertising the program in 25 languages.

Which suspects are included on the most-wanted list, as well as the size of their bounties, are decided by a panel of counterterrorism officials from several agencies, including the FBI and the CIA, as well as the Pentagon and the White House.

Since 1984, the program has handed out $77 million to more than 50 tipsters, according to the State Department. The largest single reward, $30 million, went to an informant who enabled the U.S. military to find and kill ousted Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's sons, Uday and Qusay, in 2003.

More than $700 million worth of bounties remain available for scores of terrorist suspects who are still on the loose.

In most cases, the State Department does not divulge how much it pays out, or to whom, citing

security concerns. Annual reports are sent to Congress but are classified.

The Bureau of Diplomatic Security declined interview requests, and the State Department would not answer a list of questions submitted for this article. Such information "might compromise the integrity of this program," Raphael L. Cook, a State Department spokesman, said in an e-mail.

Most of the money distributed under the program, however, has gone for the capture of suspects unrelated to al-Qaeda, cases that have been publicized by the government show.

In addition to the $30 million given for the information about Hussein's sons, the U.S. government has paid at least $3 million for tips leading to the capture of three of the deposed president's former commanders in Iraq. It has also given more than $11 million in rewards to tipsters who turned in members of the Abu Sayyaf network, a radical Islamist group in the Philippines.

The only publicly confirmed award connected to al-Qaeda was granted in January. A Minnesota flight instructor, Clarence Prevost, received $5 million from Rewards for Justice for serving as a witness in the 2006 trial of Zacarias Moussaoui.

Moussaoui was sentenced to life in prison for training to hijack airplanes in the United States. The reward to the flight instructor was granted over the objections of some federal agents involved in the Moussaoui investigation, who noted that no reward had been posted in advance of his arrest in August 2001.

State Department officials said people whose actions help prevent terrorist attacks are also eligible for rewards. Since then, two other flight instructors who warned the FBI about Moussaoui have each pressed a claim for $5 million, as well.

Other branches of the U.S. government have separate programs to disburse awards. Last October, the U.S. military announced that it would offer as much as $200,000 for information leading to the capture of 12 al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders operating in Afghanistan. None of those named is included on the Rewards for Justice's most-wanted list.

According to a 2006 book by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, his country "earned bounties totaling millions of dollars" from the CIA for handing over hundreds of suspected al-Qaeda militants after the Sept. 11 hijackings. Many were sent to the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Former CIA director George J. Tenet confirmed the practice in his memoir, published last year, describing how the agency has doled out millions in "prize money" to informants and bounty hunters, including a "foreign agent" whose tip led to the capture of Sept. 11 organizer Khalid Sheik Mohammed in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, in 2003.

An Invisible Program

In 2004, Rep. Mark Steven Kirk (R-Ill.) visited Pakistan to assess why Rewards for Justice had generated so little information regarding al-Qaeda's leadership. He discovered that the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad had effectively shut down the program. There was no radio or television advertising. The embassy had even stopped giving away matchbooks adorned with photos of al-Qaeda chiefs such as bin Laden.

"We were at zero," Kirk said. "I couldn't believe it."

According to Kirk, embassy officials said they were consumed with broader priorities, such as assisting U.S. troops in Afghanistan, easing tensions between India and Pakistan and containing the spread of Islamic radicalism in the region.

"In the grand scheme of things, the hunt for Osama bin Laden should be an item of theological importance for people in the U.S. government," Kirk said. "But the key thing about the Rewards for Justice program is that no one in a rural area -- anywhere -- knows about it."

In contrast, the State Department has often gone trolling for tips in parts of the world where al-Qaeda sightings have been rare.

In December 2006, for example, Rewards for Justice kicked off an advertising blitz in dozens of airports. It distributed hundreds of wanted posters featuring 26 suspects, including bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders.

The ad campaign, timed to coincide with the Christmas and New Year's holiday periods, was limited to the United States. Airports blanketed with the posters included Londonderry, N.H., Myrtle Beach, S.C., and several in Hawaii.

"Increasing an airline traveler's awareness of wanted terrorists is part of the U.S. government's mission in fighting the war on terror," Richard J. Griffin, then assistant secretary of state for diplomatic security, said at the time.

Advertising in the wrong places, however, can bog down investigators by encouraging calls from crackpots, people familiar with the program said.

"We'd get a lot of tips that were totally off the wall," said Deering, the former State Department official. "You're looking for the proverbial diamond in a haystack."

Deering said he remained a fan of the concept behind Rewards for Justice but questioned how well it had been managed.

"Putting out Web sites and posters in embassies and consulates is good," he said. "But if you're not getting to the audience, there are problems."

Too Abstract a Concept

In 2004, Congress passed a law authorizing the State Department to post rewards as high as $50 million apiece -- a provision with bin Laden in mind. Last fall, Rep. Dan Boren (D-Okla.)

went further, introducing a bill that would raise the cap to $500 million.

The State Department has declined to boost the reward for bin Laden, arguing that more money was unlikely to do any good and would only add to his notoriety.

Kirk, the Illinois congressman, said Rewards for Justice should offer something besides dollars. Huge cash rewards are an abstract concept, he said, for many people living in the impoverished tribal regions of northwestern Pakistan where bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders are believed to have taken refuge.

He said those likely to blow the whistle are young Pakistani men living near the Afghan border who have been mistreated by foreign al-Qaeda fighters. For them, the most attractive reward is likely to be something simple.

"One of the best things that could happen to them would be to get their hands on a motorcycle," he said.

Arthur Keller, a former CIA case officer who was posted in Pakistan in 2006, said the rewards program was hobbled by other factors.

"They'd love to have a $25 million bounty, and they aren't supportive of Osama," Keller added. "But they don't necessarily trust the U.S. Who do you report it to? The local police chief? . . . They're not sure who to turn to or who to trust."

Keller said brutal attempts at intimidation by al-Qaeda and Taliban sympathizers were widespread in Pakistan's tribal areas. Opponents were often silenced simply by branding them as spies for the U.S. or Pakistani governments, regardless of whether the accusation was true.

"Just about every week, somewhere in the tribal areas, a body was found in the road with a note pinned to it saying, 'American spy,' " Keller said.

Presidential Protection

In other places, the whereabouts of wanted terrorists are well known. But the State Department has had trouble persuading allied governments to act.

Three suspected al-Qaeda operatives sought under the Rewards for Justice program are in Yemen, each with a bounty of as much as $5 million on his head.

Two -- Jamal al-Badawi and Fahd al-Quso-- were convicted in Yemeni courts of helping to organize the 2000 attack on the USS Cole that killed 17 American sailors and wounded 39. The Yemeni government has refused to hand them over to the United States, citing the lack of an extradition treaty.

The third is Elbaneh, a U.S.-Yemeni citizen and accused member of the so-called Lackawanna Six, a group of young men from Buffalo who traveled to Afghanistan in the spring of 2001 to train in al-Qaeda camps.

Unlike other members of the cell, Elbaneh did not return to the United States after going to Afghanistan. He was indicted in absentia in New York in 2003 on charges of providing material support to a terrorist organization.

In January 2004, under pressure from the United States, Yemeni authorities arrested him. But two years later he escaped from a maximum security prison in Sanaa, along with 22 other inmates.

He resurfaced nearly three months ago, on Feb. 23, when he walked unannounced into a cramped Sanaa courtroom, escorted by four bodyguards.

Interrupting a trial of other al-Qaeda suspects, he told the judge his name and declared that all charges against him were bogus. "I haven't committed any crimes in this country or in the United States," he said.

He dropped another bombshell by saying he had personally surrendered to Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh and was under his protection. Then he walked out of the courtroom. Stunned court officials did nothing.

U.S. officials objected and renewed demands for his extradition to face trial in Buffalo. Yemen has refused, and senior officials in Sanaa have downplayed the seriousness of the U.S. charges.

Although Elbaneh faces charges in Yemen for his alleged involvement in attacks on foreign oil workers and in another plot, Interior Minister Rashad al-Alimi said the case against him was weak. Alimi said that Elbaneh was cooperating in other investigations and that the government was inclined to treat him leniently.

"One of our tactics is if these terrorist suspects have no blood on their hands and if they are moving in the right direction, let's help him move in that direction," Alimi said. "Long imprisonment sometimes makes people angry and makes them vicious, so that they want revenge. That's their nature -- Yemenis are like that."

Abdel-Karim al-Iryani, a former prime minister and adviser to Saleh, confirmed that Elbaneh had surrendered to the Yemeni president in exchange for a guarantee of protection.

"It's a very traditional thing in Yemen," Iryani said. "You surrender yourself to a high-ranking official. His surrender was accepted on the basis that he would cooperate."

Meanwhile, Elbaneh is allowed to remain free as long as he promises to appear in court when summoned.

Khaled al-Anesi, a defense attorney who represented Elbaneh before his prison breakout, said the U.S. reward had caught some people's attention in Yemen. The sheer size of it, he joked, might even make his former client think twice about staying on the lam.

"Five million for a bounty is an awful lot of money," Anesi said. "If I were him, I'd say, 'I give up, but give this $5 million to my family.' "